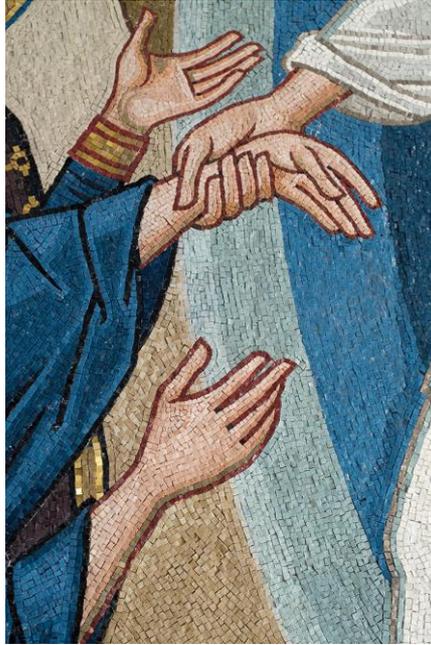


20.04.11 Paschal Vigil / Easter Day



Gospel: John 20:1-8

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, ‘They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.’ Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed.

Homily

ALLELUIA! CHRIST IS RISEN.

Easter morning brings news that, however ancient it is, is always *good*. When Mary Magdalene was sent to the other disciples by the risen Jesus, she breathlessly announced the news ‘Brothers, I have seen the Lord!’ (*Jn* 20.18). Or, in her words from the Easter Sequence (the great hymn before the Gospel on Easter morning) ‘Christ, my hope, has risen!’ The early Christians never considered their faith a religion like the hundreds of cults of the kind that washed around the ancient world. It was *news* – good news, a joyful annunciation – which it was their purpose in the world to spread, to proclaim, to invite others to share: news of the goodness of God, of the victory of Christ, of the reconciliation of man to God. The good news itself was the source of a powerfully transfigured life, which lasted beyond death, even beyond the end of the known world. To believe in the resurrection was to believe that God’s new age had finally begun. God had done something so stupendous, it could only be thought of as a new creation. St Peter, years after his race with St John to the empty tomb on the first Easter morning, put it this way:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for by his mercy, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, he has given us *a second birth into a living hope*. ... In this we rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith may be found to result in praise and glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed. (*1 Pet* 1.3-7)

Even now, at Easter 2020, in the midst of hugely threatening pandemic which challenges every aspect of our common life, the faith of Christians is based on *that same news*, on the testimony of those sisters and brothers who heard the mysterious messengers at the empty tomb testify that Jesus *crucified* was now Jesus *risen*, and who saw his wounded hands and side.

That is the first thing that I want to underline. Why? Because the resurrection has come to be spoken of by many, sometimes even within the church, as a metaphor. It is paired-off with death, like darkness is paired with light, exile with return. It is deployed as a pattern or a model to help organize and colour our thoughts and experiences. For example, some (even some secular commentators) will say about our present situation – in which the power of death has been unleashed upon us (*real* and degrading death of the kind that Jesus saw in the face of his friend Lazarus, and which he himself suffered) – that the pandemic will in course ‘give way’ to resurrection.

That way of speaking is not what this feast is about. The death and resurrection of Jesus the Son of God were not—according to the apostles’ witness at least—metaphorical. Nor were they speculations or mystical experiences. The resurrection was anything but the restoration of normality. They were *events*, willed by God, which occurred both *in* history and *beyond* it, and have made an irreversible impact in both. The light that shines from the cross of Christ, and his empty tomb, is, to the eye of faith, a *divine* light, that has torn open the darkness of sin and death, and revealed the splendour of God’s truth and goodness. It was truly the same *Jesus* who descended to meet us at the very lowest part of our need, and died there, who has now been delivered, transfigured, and taken up into the unlimited aliveness of God.

And the reasons why that should matter so much to us are the *consequences*. The first, as St Peter mentions, is the *living hope* that the resurrection gives each Christian, and the Church as a body. The resurrection of Christ ‘is the chief article of our faith’, said Luther, ‘For if there were no resurrection, we would have no consolation or hope, and everything else that Christ did and suffered would be futile’ (*The Catholic Epistles*). All those who are joined to Christ’s risen body by baptism and the eucharist, are born to a *living hope*, *active* within them.

And the second consequence of faith in the resurrection of Jesus is that it motivates us to *share hope* with the world. Christians can bring hope to the world, but only to the extent to which it is real for themselves – only if you or I have *died* to the past and live Christ’s *new life*. St Augustine said: ‘You have believed, you have been baptized: your old life is dead, it was killed on the cross, buried in baptism. May the new life arise.’ (cf *Sermone Guelf*, ix). It a life of self-less love, of prayer, of forgiveness, of service, of non-violence. In other words, only if, like Christ, Christians live *not of* this world, can Christians be signs of hope *in* the world and *for* the world.

The sense of hope is at a very low ebb at present, and will be much needed when we are in a position to reflect and reconstruct our common life, nationally and internationally. It is clear that politics, science, technology, economics and material resources will not themselves provide the great hope which people need to live, and to create just and sustainable future. It is also already clear that our shared challenge will be to understand quite how thoroughly our individual well-being is bound up with the well-being of all our fellow human beings not just those closest to us.

When Paul found himself immersed in difficulties and trials of various kinds, he wrote to his faithful disciple Timothy: ‘We have set our hope on the living God’ (*1 Tim* 4.10), the risen Christ present in our world. ‘May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.’ (*Rom* 15.13).

Prayer

Eternal God, who made this feast to shine
with the brightness of your Son’s risen glory:
may our hearts and minds be renewed with paschal joy,
and guided by the living hope that flows from his resurrection.
Through Christ our Passover. Amen.